God Comes Through the Line
Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
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One of my more memorable friends was a Presbyterian minister by the name of Joe Ledwell. He's been gone for several years now, but I remember him still. Joe was the pastor of a neighborhood church on the far south side of Chicago. He was a faithful minister, a good and kind and always cheerful man. He was a grandfather and we always talked about our grandchildren whenever I saw him at a meeting. His people loved Joe: so did his colleagues. I was surprised one morning to see Joe's picture in the Chicago Tribune. The following article described something that few, if any people, knew about Joe. I certainly didn't. Once a month Joe used to go to the cemetery where Cook County buries its unclaimed and unidentified dead: homeless people, men and women, eighteen, twenty, twenty-five per month, every month: people who had been totally forgotten, claimed by no one; known by no one, grieved by no one. The county identifies them by number: #612897, white female; #612898, black male; #612899, suburban Hispanic female. Once a month on the appointed day Joe used to go to the cemetery, and as the simple pine coffin was lowered into a common grave, conducted a memorial service, read scripture, prayed, commended them all to the love and mercy of God, the God who knows everyone of us, calls us by name, the God who never forgets us, even though everybody else has.

I knew Joe for years before I learned what he was doing every month. Typically he was embarrassed by the newspaper article and his picture and all the attention. The last thing in the world Joe wanted was a lot of attention. He was content simply doing what he was doing.

One time Jesus said:

> I was hungry and you gave me food;
> I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink;
> I was a stranger and you welcomed me;
> I was naked and you gave me clothing;
> I was in prison and you visited me.

He was asked: "Lord, when did all that happen?" He answered:

> Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these – members of my family, you did it to me.

It's the last week of his life and Jesus is clearly preparing his followers, his disciples and friends, to carry on without him. The context makes what he said particularly poignant – and important. According to Matthew it is the last thing he taught them. You might say that it is the grand conclusion to everything that went before, the summation of all his teaching. It's about

judgment day – a topic everybody is interested in – and concerned about. All the nations of the world are there. Jesus is the judge, and he's separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep are the righteous ones: they inherit the kingdom, welcome into God's reign. The goats are treated harshly – "depart from me." The point here is not the symbolic imagery of the eternal fire – but the dynamic – what is actually happening. Human beings are finally accountable to God for the way they live their lives.

The criteria for the judgment are surprisingly simple, according to Jesus. "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink." "When did we do that, Lord?" the righteous ask. The unforgettable answer: "As you did it to one of the least of them – who, by the way, are members of my family – you did it to me."

Then comes the sequel, the counterpoint: I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and no drink, a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, in prison and you did not visit. "When, Lord?" they protest. "We don't recall anything like that happening. We never saw you hungry, thirsty, cold and homeless. If we had seen you like that, believe me, we'd have been right there, right there with you." The clear, devastating judgment: "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

Notice that both groups are equally surprised. Neither is aware of the eternal significance of what they are doing or not doing. Like my friend, Joe, they were surprised that what they did merited any attention at all.

That is certainly very different from the popular notions of judgment day. Notice the total absence of the moralisms many of us were taught God cares most about. The evangelicals of my childhood would be crushed that he didn't mention drinking and smoking. My evangelical friends today would be dismayed that he doesn't say a word about sex – same-sex or heterosex – not a word. Conservatives would be dismayed that he doesn't say a word about orthodoxy, right doctrine, creeds or church membership. No one says a word about conversion. And progressives would be disappointed that he doesn't say anything about racial equality or the environment. Now, this is not to denigrate any of those issues and commitments. It is simply to pay attention to the text and Jesus' stunningly simple criteria that we are held accountable for our treatment of the "least of these."

It is certainly not to denigrate Christian theology, doctrine. The early church needed to develop a way to engage the intellectual currents of the ancient world, the philosophers that prevailed in centers of learning. It had to learn to engage in the marketplace of ideas, to say what it believed. It still does. One of the great wonders of history is that it did. By the second century Christian scholars had emerged to engage, write and teach in Alexandria, Antioch, Rome. Nothing is more essential today than rigorous,

authentic Christian scholarship capable of participating in the conversation about the central issues of our time: science and values, economics, war and peace.

But Jesus teaches here that your theology, your creed, what you affirm and say you believe, aren't going to get you into heaven.

Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton University, tackles the issue in her book, Beyond Belief. How, Pagels asks, did Christianity move from a movement characterized by radical love to a system of doctrine?

From the very beginning, Pagels argues, what attracted people to Christianity and to the Christian church was the visible practice of caring love. Those in need anywhere in the Empire where there was a community of Christians could find help. Members of the Christian family contributed money to a fund to support orphans who were abandoned on the street and garbage dumps. Christians brought food, medicine and companionship to prisoners forced to work in mines, banished to prison islands, or held in jail.

"Such generosity," Pagels says, attracted crowds of newcomers, despite the risks. She quotes sociologist Rodney Stark, who observes that when the plague struck, "The common response was to run away, even from members of your own family. But Christians," Stark says, "shocked their pagan neighbors by staying to care for the sick and dying."

"Why did they do it?" Pagels asks. "Jesus and Christians believed that God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and love in return…What God requires is that human beings love one another and offer help – especially to the neediest."

The evangelical power of Christian love in the world. It has happened down across the centuries and happens today in mission outposts in West Africa, the front lines of the Ebola battle: where Christians provide compassion and care to the neediest of the needy.

Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine and founder of an inner city ministry in Washington D.C. is a born-again card-carrying evangelical who eloquently and passionately urges modern American Christians and Christian churches simply to pay attention to the Bible. As a student Wallis was challenged to dig in and discover what the Bible says about poverty and poor people. He and his friends discovered that the heart of the Old Testament law is the attention it pays to the poor, the weak and vulnerable and the stranger. They discovered that one out of sixteen verses in the New Testament is about the poor and care for the poor. Wallis was shocked. Poverty is not a liberal, democratic issue – it's a biblical issue.

Like those who first heard the story, Wallis says, we are stunned to learn that God holds us accountable, not for believing the right doctrines,

belonging to the right church, espousing the correct position on social issues, not even so much for our sexual behavior, but by the way we treat the poor.

Wallis tells a story from his experience at his inner-city ministry in Washington. Mary Glover is a volunteer at the weekly food distribution at the community center. Mary is poor herself but she is there every Saturday to help distribute food. In fact, Mary offers the prayer for the team of volunteers before the center opens. She prays, Jim Wallis says, like someone who knows who she is talking to. It's worth getting out of bed Saturday morning just to hear Mary pray. With a long line of hungry, needy people waiting outside in all kinds of weather, Mary prays: "Lord, we know you'll be comin' through this line today. So, Lord, help us to treat you well."

Wallis says, "No scholar gets Matthew 25 better than Mary." (God's Politics, p. 200-218) "When you did it to the least of these," Jesus said," you did it to me." He also said, "All the nations will be gathered at the judgment throne." It's about nations as well as individuals. There's no way to avoid the complexity and messiness of politics here. Nations, societies, will be judged on how they deal with their weakest, most vulnerable citizens – the least of these. In the midst of the ongoing debate in our country about who has responsibility for the care of the poor, the sick, the vulnerable – it is a Christian mandate to remember the least of these: the single mother struggling to make ends meet, parents of a sick child with no health insurance, urban children who live in a war zone because of the overwhelming presence of handguns and automatic weapons. The Bible is particularly concerned about the stranger, the sojourner, the alien, the immigrant. Among all the difficult issues that confront our society, none is more complex, nor controversial than immigration. The point here is not one political solution or another. This is more than political. Jesus himself insists that it is our responsibility, regardless of how we voted last Tuesday, or which party is in power.

The last story Jesus told actually does more than require a new way of seeing, dealing with, and caring for "the least of these." It redefines God. God, contrary to conventional thinking, is not a mighty but remote monarch, off somewhere in the universe, watching human history, watching us, passively. God is here. God is in the depths of the human condition. God, in Jesus Christ, is here, in human struggle, anguish, and passion. God is here, deeply present in our striving, our hoping, our living and loving and our dying.

And this story redefines righteousness. It is not the accumulation of all the wrong you have avoided, all the sin you have not committed. Righteousness, according to Jesus, is quite simply the love and compassion you have given.

And it redefines the very heart of this faith of ours – incarnation: God came down to dwell among us and with us in Jesus. “That’s just the half of it,” he said, “I am present wherever there is human need. You will see my face, the face of your savior, in the face of everyone who needs you, who looks to you for compassion, acceptance, support and love. Think of it – the face of Jesus in the faces of the homeless poor, the hungry child, the sick child; the face of Jesus in the lonely elderly, the sick, the frightened; the face of Jesus closer than that even – in the one who needs your love, your attention, your compassion; the one who needs you today – your own child, your own parents, your own spouse, partner, friend. The face of Jesus.

“As you did it to the least of these members of my family,” he said, “you did it to me.”